

2019 02 17 – Deep Roots

Jeremiah 17:5-14

How many of you have ever travelled to a desert? Where was it? (*wait for answers*) It's amazing to think that we have deserts right here in Canada! I remember the first time I arrived by bus into Kamloops, BC and was shocked when I realized that we had driven out of the lush green forests of the mountains into a valley practically devoid of vegetation. And that's not the only desert in British Columbia; the Okanagan Valley is similar and so is the area around Lillooet.

Here in Southwestern Saskatchewan, we also know something about drought and sand and salt. We have, of course, The Great Sandhills, containing one of the largest set of active sand dunes in Canada. And so much salt in our water and soil that we have towns and villages with economies based on a local salt mine. We can understand what the ancient prophet Jeremiah was talking about when he described "stony wastes in the desert, an uninhabited land of salt.

Jeremiah was using images that were familiar to the Israelite people, images from their own deserts in the Middle East. And he was describing what it feels like to be disconnected from God, from the Holy Mystery, from YHWH. He said,

Cursed are those who trust in human ways, who rely on things of the flesh, whose hearts turn away from YHWH. They are like stunted vegetation in the desert, with no hope in the future.

Jeremiah was warning his people that if they tried to live their lives on their own, without YHWH, that they would suffer from a constant thirst and would not thrive. He went even further and noted that if they tried to quench that thirst through greed or deceit or some other false idol that they might experience short-term gains but would end-up with nothing. Jeremiah explained it this way:

Like the partridge hatching the eggs it did not lay,
so are all who gain wealth unjustly.
It will leave them in midlife,
and at the end of their life
they will prove themselves the fool.

This is warning for all of us. It's easy to fall into the traps that have been laid for us in the power and money worshipping society in which we live. It is easy for us to find short-term pleasure in the things that money can buy and in the perks that power can provide. It is easy for us to lose track of what is important as we focus on climbing the so-called ladder of success.

But earlier this week, when I read this passage, I couldn't help but think of people in the news, people like Paul Manafort, and the other wealthy men around President Trump who are now in jail because they worshipped the god of power and greed. Or people like Bill Cosby or former Catholic Priest and Cardinal Theodore McCarrick who, at the end of their lives have fallen in disgrace because they worshipped the god of lust. They have all "proved themselves the

fool,” and are now standing in stony wastes in the desert, an uninhabited land of salt.”

So this is what happens when our hearts turn away from YHWH. This is what happens when we put our “trust in human ways,” and rely solely on “things of the flesh.” And I’m not saying “things of the flesh” are bad. They are not. Our bodies are a gift from God. But Jeremiah is reminding us that true health and wealth comes only when we feed both our bodies and our spirit. He says

Blessed are those who put their trust in God, with God for their hope.

They are like a tree planted by the river that thrusts its roots toward the stream.

“A tree planted by the river,” I love that image. It just makes so much sense. Think about the prairie: this land in which we live, this place where native trees are few and far between. When the first people arrived from Europe and homesteaded on this land, where did they go to find trees, to find the wood to build their homes and to burn in their fireplaces? They went to the valleys, to the coulees, to the rivers, to the creeks. They went to where the water was flowing, to where the trees could thrust their roots toward the stream. The only place that trees can thrive on the prairie is near a source of water.

What Jeremiah said to the Israelites nearly 2500 years ago is still true for us today. If we are to thrive, to be healthy in both body and soul, if we are to be wealthy in all the ways that matter, then, like the Israelites, we must put our trust

in YHWH, in the Holy Mystery that connects us all. We must thrust our roots toward the stream of living water that is the unconditional love of God.

It is those deep roots that will keep us grounded even in difficult times. Jeremiah described the deeply rooted tree is this way:

When the heat comes, it feels no heat;
its leaves stay green.
It is untroubled in a year of drought,
and never ceases to bear fruit.

We can be that tree. We can be rooted in the living waters that are the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being, so deeply rooted that we can survive even the most difficult of times, so deeply rooted that we can avoid the temptation of false idols like power, money, and fame.

But what do we need to do in order to grow those roots? What do we need to do in order to have that strong connection with the Holy Spirit? I believe that the secret to having a connection with YHWH is not in the doing, but in the being. What we have to do – and this is not an easy thing in today's society – what we have to do, is stop doing for a while so we can just be.

In order to grow deep roots that are firmly grounded in God's grace, we need to take Sabbath time. This is time away from our work, our volunteer commitments, and all the other tasks that fill our busy schedules. This is time to

focus on family, on ourselves and especially on our connection with the sacred. It is a time for worship, for getting out into nature, for enjoying food and fellowship. For the Hebrew people, the Sabbath begins with sundown on Friday and lasts until the following evening. For Christians, Sunday is typically our Sabbath day. When I was a child on the farm, the chores still had to be done on Sundays and the cows milked. But we didn't harvest on that day. Saturday afternoon we would make sure the hay bales were stoked in case of rain, but they were left in the field until Monday. Summer Sundays were for family picnics, for swimming, fishing, barbecuing and enjoying the blessings of God's creation.

In order to grow deep roots we also need Sabbath time during each day. It can be five minutes, fifteen minutes or even an hour. It can happen once or occur throughout the day. This is a time to meditate, to pray, to read, to walk, to just be. This is a time to connect with the sacred in whatever way works best for you. It is a time of reflection and of rejuvenation. It is a time when we recognize that we not alone. It is a time when we thrust our roots toward the stream of living water that is God, that is the sacred, that is the Essence of Love.

As we enjoy this long weekend that includes Family Day, as we move into a week that, for many, is a break from school and work, may we all take this opportunity to grow deep roots so that we may thrive even in the desert times of our lives.